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America's 'Terrible Thing'

by James Carroll

At least God told Moses the truth. Before laying on him the requirements of a monotheistic faith that would immediately cause violent conflict with idol-worshippers, God said, "It is a terrible thing that I will do with you." And so it was.

The statement comes in the very verses of Exodus that define the covenant God makes with Moses and his harried people. "I shall do marvels," God promises. But it is the certainty of "the terrible thing" that defines this relationship going forward. The terrible thing, first, of permanent war against the Amorites, the Canaanites, and their eternal successors. The terrible thing, existentially, of living without idols. The terrible thing of the Law, which all inevitably violate. The terrible thing of being forced to face the truth, a mandate God gives by example with this stark declaration at the outset.

In the United States of America, a terrible thing shapes our relationship to the world, but we do not admit it, not even on its unhappy anniversary. Sixty years ago this week, American B-29s named Enola Gay and Bock's Car dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities. The men responsible insisted, in the face of shocking devastation, that the bombs were not so terrible.

"We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world," Truman confided to his diary after the successful test of the weapon in July. But he immediately mitigated its terribleness by swearing to himself (as he would to the public for the rest of his life) that "the target will be a purely military one." No women or children at Ground Zero. After learning of the Hiroshima attack, thinking not of Japanese casualties but of the power he had just claimed for his nation, he described the bomb as "the greatest thing in history."

Truman's secretary of war, Henry L. Stimson, knew more of the horrors of the bomb than any other senior figure, but he too downplayed its terrible character. "This deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent choice," he wrote later. He saluted the atomic bomb for putting an end to the firebombing of Japanese cities, as if that murderous operation were carried out by some other force than his own. "Thank God for the atomic bomb," the critic and war veteran Paul Fussell wrote. Only an American consensus that the bomb was a good thing — not terrible at all — allowed the nation's succeeding generations to pour treasure and moral value into the nuclear abyss.

The bomb remains the source of transcendent political power, which is why other nations maneuver to obtain it, even now. Arriviste nuclear terrorists want to play with the fire that Washington not only lit, but keeps burning. The United States has yet to reckon with the evil forces it set loose 60 years ago, a refusal that keeps those forces rampant today.

And so with Iraq. Under George W. Bush, America has done and is doing a terrible thing in that nation. Yet to hear the war described in Washington, one would still think it is an exercise in nation building, democracy, humanitarian intervention — women's liberation. Indeed, the administration's language mavens last week began eschewing the word "war," which is a sure sign they know it is lost. The hard truth is that we have destroyed the place we claimed to want to rescue, and no matter what tactics the improvising Pentagon adopts (US troops withdraw? US forces escalate?), the situation will only worsen. Political pressures require Bush to pretend that a positive outcome hovers at the horizon in Iraq, but that is a mirage. Together with Tony Blair, he also denies that terror attacks a world away from Baghdad constitute a second front in the Iraq war, but that too is self-serving illusion. The coalition of denial.

Just as the consequences of the introduction of nuclear weapons into the global polity are so dreadful that America still cannot acknowledge them, so the facts of life on the ground in Iraq -- and below ground in London -- are now so deeply tragic that dumb deception is the administration's only response. We are working marvels, Washington boasts, even as the ruins pile up. It may seem irreverent, or irrelevant, to compare all of this to the initiating act of the God of Exodus, but the warning is there to heed, together with the example. If it is a terrible thing we are doing, at very least we can face that truth. And admit it.

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